Less Brussels, more La Manche*? The Case of Anglo-French Defence Co-operation

Kalyani Unkule  November 25, 2010

The UK and France recently concluded military co-operation deals that will see the two nations undertake joint military exercises and share aircraft carriers and nuclear testing facilities. Identifying areas within defence research and industry where common effort can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes will assume priority in moving forward. Such co-operation may either be viewed as a substitute for Common European Defence or as reinforcement to it.

Leaders of the countries in question have taken care to characterize cooperative measures as in no way constituting pooling of sovereignty. This demonstrates that national defence is more vital to the self-image of certain European powers than others, as well as reflecting to an extent the known EU-scepticism (somewhat diluted in coalition with the Liberal Democrats) of the incumbent UK government.

Bilateral initiatives between member-states may not necessarily be construed as attempts to bypass wider EU-level institutions and mechanisms. Evidence points to a British preference for bilateral and multilateral approaches, which contrasts with Germany’s insistence that “European defence co-operation should progress within the EU common security and defence policy framework.”

Defence spending in Europe underwent a two per cent decline between 2007 and 2008. Budgetary efficiency has been an obvious trigger for burden-sharing through collaborative effort in the wake of the economic downturn. To wade its way out of dire fiscal straits, the UK is required to achieve a reduction of about GBP 4 to 8 billion on its current defence expenditure of GBP 39 billion by 2015. At the same time another major factor at play has been the perceived distancing of the US from a no-longer critical European theatre. The French President’s decision to return his country to NATO’s command structure, while simultaneously reaching out to European partners, is demonstrative of the widespread recognition that Europe needs to elevate itself from a consumer of security to a partner that can pull its own weight. That said, the transatlantic context continues to prove a cause for division among member-states.
It would be erroneous to discuss the Union’s external projection divorced from the context of internal dynamics. The EU is a relatively young security actor with an as-yet evolving identity. In academic and policy discourse, the jury is still out on the degree of commitment it is willing to make towards attainment of the stated Common Foreign and Security Policy objectives of promoting democracy, good governance and human rights. Even as the competing notions of civilian, military and normative power remain contested, the drive on the ground is towards militarization of security policy to develop full-spectrum capabilities for intervention.

If the evidence in Afghanistan is anything to go by, domestic public opinion is far from encouraging of a more interventionist stance beyond the immediate neighbourhood. What level of ambition on the external front will a European elite, attempting to secure greater popular legitimacy for the EU, be able to sustain is a question worth posing. The Dutch parliament’s inability to extend its troop commitment in Afghanistan beyond 2010 (owing to electoral considerations) breathes life into the looming danger of a widening rhetoric-capabilities gap.

The most recent French White Paper on Defence and National Security proclaims the “European ambition” as priority. An intervention capability of 60,000 soldiers deployable for one year in a distant theatre, deployment capability of two or three peace-keeping or peace-enforcement operations and several civilian operations and restructuring of the European defence industry are all listed as part of the agenda. The UK's aspiration – albeit more tempered – to “collective security through NATO as the basis for territorial defence of the UK, and stability of our European neighbourhood, as well as an outward-facing EU that promotes security and prosperity” is similarly set out in the Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2010. While NATO is still believed to be the bedrock for security, there is distinct acknowledgement that “the EU’s ability to integrate civilian and military responses coherently will become increasingly important.” The EU’s instrumental role in achieving stability in the neighbourhood, efficient border management and energy security is recognized. At the same time, emphasis on the ground is on “improved national military and civilian capabilities, rather than institution building and bureaucracy.” This British insistence increases the likelihood that over the medium term, European defence will advance along the inter-governmental rather than the supra-national channel.

The pronouncement that cooperation between the two largest defence spenders in the EU runs counter to the spirit and goals of the European Security and Defence Policy appears premature, if not contrary to logic. Already the reaction in Germany, for instance, has been that the Franco-British case should serve as an exemplary precedent. The question it seems then is not whether bilateral co-operation among member-states is a substitute for (common) European
defence but whether initiatives inspired by a certain sense of desperation to preserve trans-Atlantic dependency can go far enough ahead en route to securing Europe and strengthening its Union.

* French for "English Channel"


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